

Rural Areas Study: Final Recommendations

July 1999

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In 1997 the Legislature directed the HECB to complete a study on rural areas “with consideration given to alternative approaches to educational service delivery, facility expansion, relocation or partnership, and long-term growth and future educational demands of the region.” The HECB established Community Advisory groups to represent each county, and formed a Project Coordination Team (PCT). The PCT included representatives from the institutions, the Office of Financial Management, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and the HECB. The PCT provided the oversight and management of the study effort. The Community Advisory groups and the PCT have worked cooperatively throughout the project.

MGT of America completed the following work in September 1998:

1. Economic and social analysis of each county;
2. Identification of educational needs, including many community suggestions and opinions; and
3. Recommendations to improve access.

Consistent with the findings in the study effort, the 1999 Legislature provided capital funds (\$900,000 state bonds) to expand the Wenatchee Valley College science lab at Omak. In addition, \$500,000 was provided for equipment and staff for a pilot demonstration project in Jefferson County.

HECB staff analysis and final recommendations were developed jointly with the community and institutions. A future work plan was developed for implementation.

Lessons Learned For Statewide Application From This Study:

1. Socio-economic conditions are similar in under-served rural areas, but there are important differences among and within them. Common threads include the need for more higher education services of all kinds, and the clear linkage to economic growth and community well being.
2. Providing higher education access in rural areas may well be the final access challenge in this state.
3. Lack of information, limited student services and support, and financial, family, and geographic challenges seem to affect rural students more intensely than urban students.
4. Public and private institutions have responded in a variety of ways to the need for services in many rural areas, but under-served rural populations still exist for reasons that institutions

have not been able to surmount: limited demand, limited resources, and geographical distance and terrain.

5. Small and dispersed populations preclude the traditional campus-based approach to higher education. To successfully reach isolated populations, future efforts must be much more creative and flexible in terms of facility requirements and usage.
6. Constantly and quickly changing economic and community needs require a consortial governance structure that enables quick program creation/elimination. Reliance on a number of institutions offers the breadth of program opportunity that is required. Institutions can cooperatively respond to needs on a community- and student-centered basis once the community has developed the ability to measure, monitor, and communicate those needs.
7. To serve rural areas, consortia will rely primarily on distance and e-learning, the use of existing community facilities, and reliance on small centers for visibility and outreach.
8. Success in an under-served rural area effort is very much related to a high level of community support and active assistance to institutions in their consortia efforts.
9. The HECB, or some other central body, may sometimes be needed initially to help communities implement a consortium and complete a needs assessment — but should then withdraw and let the institutions operate.
10. Recommendations specific to under-served rural areas should be incorporated into the 2000 Master Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Transmit completed study report and recommendations to the Legislature and Governor for consideration.
2. Transfer \$500,000 to Peninsula College and Washington State University for implementation of the pilot demonstration project. The funds will support activities cooperatively defined by the institutions and the community.
3. Monitor Jefferson County pilot demonstration project activities; maintain contact with community groups in both counties, and HECB staff report back to the Board on progress and achievements. Particular attention will be devoted to learning lessons that can apply to under-served rural areas across the state.
4. HECB staff contact Workforce Training Board and Office of the Governor's to identify opportunities to include higher education aspects in rural revitalization assistance.
5. Incorporate consideration of under-served rural areas into the 2000 Master Plan process in the areas of increasing access, affordability, and financial aid, and building new pathways through electronic learning.

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BACKGROUND

In 1997 the Legislature directed the HECB to complete a study of two selected under-served rural areas “with consideration given to alternative approaches to educational service delivery, facility expansion, relocation or partnership, and long-term growth and future educational demands of the region.” HECB staff has worked closely with members of the two areas, the involved institutions, and an expert consultant (MGT of America) to complete the study effort. Community advisory groups representing Okanogan and Jefferson counties and a Project Coordinating Team were formed.

The consultant’s report was completed in September 1998 and includes an economic and social analysis of each county, an identification of education needs, and a set of recommendations to improve access to higher education services. Active community and institutional support were evident throughout the study effort, in the review of the consultant’s recommendations, and in preparation of final HECB staff recommendations contained in the attached report.

Consistent with the findings in the study effort, the 1999 Legislature provided capital funds (\$900,000 state bonds) to expand the Wenatchee Valley College science lab at Omak. In addition, \$500,000 was provided for equipment and staff for a pilot demonstration project in Jefferson County.

THE STUDY EFFORT

Profiles of Jefferson and Okanogan Counties: Socio-economic factors. This study provides a profile of each of these counties in order to understand how to enable residents to achieve their education goals. At the same time, this study shows how education is one key to an improved economic base. While each county has unique characteristics, each shares socio-economic conditions commonly seen in other rural areas. Therefore, they offer an opportunity to explore some of the postsecondary education needs of rural counties generally, and to consider cost-effective ways to address them. At the same time, it became clear in this study that differences between (and within) rural areas require individual strategies to best meet identified needs.

Both Jefferson and Okanogan counties are strong candidates for economic growth and development. Both contain regional service centers and important small cities. New employment sectors are displacing older ones. Both counties are relatively close to the populations, visitors, markets, and industries of British Columbia. Both counties comprise substantial uninhabited rural areas where much land is owned by the federal government or Indian nations. Both counties are displaying population growth: Jefferson County is the second fastest growing county in the state, while Okanogan County is growing at a somewhat slower rate.

Participation Rates. Both counties have higher education enrollments below statewide average participation rates. In Jefferson County the 1996 community college participation rate was 2.53

percent, well below the statewide average of 4.06 percent. In that year, the community college participation rate in Okanogan County was 2.65 percent.

The participation rate for Jefferson County residents in upper-division programs was .57 percent, also well below the state average of .95 percent. In Okanogan County the rate was .75 percent. The HECB goal for upper-division enrollments — the 50th-percentile nationally by 2010 — equates to a participation rate of 1.13 percent. The additional numbers of students associated with achieving the HECB goal participation rates are not great by urban county criteria, but they represent important deficits by Jefferson and Okanogan County standards. When taken together, the participation deficits in rural counties represent a substantial challenge to the State of Washington since per capita participation is below the state average in many rural counties without four-year institutions.

E-learning Possibilities. This study directed particular attention to examining the possibilities of distance and e-learning education meeting the needs of rural areas for two obvious and inter-related reasons: cost control and limited demand. The capital costs associated with the development of conventional campuses remain high, and the numbers of students that could be served in this manner are both limited and dispersed. Thus, if opportunity is to be increased and access is to be affordable, creative alternative delivery modes involving e-learning and traditional distance education are the most likely approaches to offer feasible solutions.

Electronic approaches are becoming more practical and available every day, and they may offer the most reasonable solution to increasing higher education services in rural areas. However, it is important to understand if these approaches will meet local goals and expectations. For this reason, community involvement was a very important aspect in the study.

This study effort also provided an opportunity to review and discuss some of the challenges and opportunities of e-learning and distance education among a number of higher education institutions. The willingness of some institutions to entertain such solutions may represent something of a departure from earlier service delivery approaches. The need for e-learning and distance education became clear because of costs and economies of scale. Therefore, the focus of the discussion quickly turned to how to make these approaches work. Continued progress to develop, refine, and implement these approaches will be of great benefit to students all across the state — both in rural and urban settings.

Higher Education Access: An Historical Perspective. The consultants have presented their view of various periods of emphasis in the development of public higher education in this state, beginning with the creation of the University of Washington and Washington State University as traditional, residential, research institutions. This was followed by the development of the regional universities, originally as residential “normal schools.” In the 1960s and 1970s the creation of the community college system and The Evergreen State College represented further efforts to provide widespread access in additional areas of the state. This was followed by the creation of the branch campuses to recognize the needs of growing urban areas. The culmination of this expansion phase may be the effort to find a way to serve the major population area in North Snohomish, Island, and Skagit counties.

Next Steps: Meeting the Needs of Rural Communities. The next developmental phase of the state higher education system might well be bringing higher education services to citizens that are separated from the current system by distance and economics. These efforts already have begun through community college satellite campuses, university outreach efforts, and the

formation of multi-institutional consortia. All of these efforts share the goals of extending access and controlling costs.

This study enters at this point. The attention is on the specific education needs of residents of Jefferson and Okanogan Counties, although the findings and recommendations also may carry implications for other rural areas of Washington. The higher education needs of residents of rural-areas are no less pressing than the needs of those who live in cities. But the unfavorable cost-benefit ratios that have precluded conventional campus solutions are no more favorable now. By virtue of the widening spectrum of electronic knowledge media that are now available, effective responses to the higher education needs of rural area residents are becoming feasible. Perhaps most important, they promise to greatly increase the equity in the system and the prospects for achieving the state's long-standing higher education goals of access, responsiveness, and affordability.

SUMMARY OF STUDY FINDINGS

Major study findings are summarized as follows:

Socio-economic analysis:

- Most population growth is in the older age groups, particularly the group 65 years and older. This growth phenomenon is contributing both to an increase in the average age of the population and, unless ways are found to retain larger numbers of out-migrating younger adults (ages 15 to 24), to possible future labor shortages.
- Economic emphases are shifting from natural resources-based to service and tourism industries.
- There is slow but steady employment growth, although the State Department of Employment Security classifies both counties as “distressed areas” because of current rates of unemployment.

Education program needs:

The field studies indicate that the greatest needs are for the following:

- coordinated and cooperative approach among providers of postsecondary service;
- vocational and continuing education programs plus selected four-year degree opportunities;
- improved affordability of higher education; and
- improved information about program availability, student support services, financial aid, counseling, etc.

The economics of higher education also dictate that there be extensive and effective use of electronic technologies and distance education in meeting local needs.

Special considerations include the following items:

- Expanded access in these rural areas should be provided in a non-traditional approach that is tailored to the needs of the areas, is flexible to meet changing needs, and builds on the specific strengths of a number of institutions.
- Creative new approaches with reliance on current capabilities of rural areas and heavy involvement by local community organizations will be required.
- Possible adjustments to funding systems and financial assistance to recognize the unique needs and characteristics of rural area students could help increase participation.
- A “center” is required that residents could identify with higher education service availability, and that would provide a focus for information, student services, and some course delivery.
- A process of continuing needs assessment should be implemented in each rural area to ensure programs are directly responsive to the changing economic and community environment.

Lessons Learned For Statewide Application:

1. Economic and social conditions in rural under-served areas have common threads, but there are important differences among (and within) them. Common threads include the need for more higher education services of all kinds (degrees, non-degree courses, vocational and career programs) and the clear linkage to economic growth and community well being.
2. Rural areas may well represent the final stage (and challenge) of higher education system development in this state.
3. Lack of information, limited student services and support, and financial, family and geographic challenges seem to impact rural students more intensely than urban students.
4. Institutions have responded in a variety of ways to the need for services in many rural areas. But under-served rural populations still exist for reasons that institutions have not been able to surmount (limited demand, limited resources, geographical distance and terrain, etc.).
5. Small and dispersed populations preclude the traditional campus-based approach that institutions and communities have traditionally seen. To successfully reach these populations, future efforts must be much more creative and flexible in terms of facility requirements and usage.
6. Constantly and quickly changing economic and community needs require a consortial governance structure that enables quick program creation/elimination. Reliance on a number of institutions offers the breadth of program opportunity that is required. Institutions can cooperatively respond to needs on a community- and student-centered basis once the community has developed the ability to measure, monitor and communicate those needs.

7. Distance learning, e-learning, using existing community facilities, and relying on small centers for visibility and outreach will predominate the activities of consortia that are formed to bring services to under-served rural areas.
8. Success in an under-served rural area effort is very much related to a high level of community support and active assistance to institutions in their consortia efforts.
9. The HECB, or some other central authority, may sometimes be needed initially to assist other motivated under-served rural areas implement a consortium and complete a needs assessment—but should then withdraw and let the institutions operate.
10. Recommendations specific to under-served rural areas should be incorporated into the master plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Board is requested to approve the staff report prepared pursuant to Section 610 of the 1997-99 Operating Budget Appropriations Act (Chapter 149, Laws of 1997) for submission to the Governor and Legislature.

Additionally, the Board is requested to approved the following actions:

1. Transfer \$500,000 to Peninsula College for implementation of the pilot demonstration project. The funds will support activities cooperatively defined by the institutions and the community.
2. Monitor Jefferson County pilot demonstration project activities; maintain contact with community groups in both counties, and HECB staff report back to the Board on progress and achievements. Particular attention will be devoted to learning lessons that can apply to under-served rural areas across the state.
3. HECB staff contact Workforce Training Board and Governor's Office to identify opportunities to include higher education aspects in rural revitalization assistance.
4. Incorporate consideration of under-served rural areas into the master plan process in the areas of increasing access, affordability and financial aid, and building new pathways through electronic learning.

RESOLUTION NO. 98-22

WHEREAS, Section 610 of the 1997-99 Operating Budget Appropriations Act (Chapter 149, Laws of 1997), provides funding for the Higher Education Coordinating Board for activities related to higher education facilities planning and access issues related to capital facilities; and

WHEREAS, Included within this mandate is specific provision to conduct a study regarding the postsecondary education needs of Okanogan and Jefferson counties and surrounding communities with consideration given to alternative approaches to educational service delivery, facility expansion, relocation or partnership, and long-term growth and future educational demands of the regions; and

WHEREAS, The Board retained MGT of America (hereinafter referred to as the "Consultant") to assist in carrying out these legislative directives by providing a thorough socio-economic profile of these two rural areas and an analysis of economic and educational needs; and

WHEREAS, The Board established a Project Coordination Team consisting of representatives of the University of Washington, Washington State University, Western Washington University, Central Washington University, Big Bend Community College, Peninsula College, Wenatchee Valley College, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and the Office of Financial Management to provide expert advice and program consultation to the Consultant and HECB staff on the elements of the study; and

WHEREAS, The Consultant has submitted the final report and recommendations concerning the postsecondary education needs of Okanogan and Jefferson counties; and

WHEREAS, The Consultant has concluded that expanded postsecondary education opportunities are essential to the economic and community vitality of Okanogan and Jefferson counties, and to rural areas across the State of Washington; and

WHEREAS, The Project Coordination Team has concluded that the needs of rural areas can best be served by a consortial approach combining the programs and offerings of a number of institutions to respond quickly to the constantly changing needs of rural areas in the appropriate scale and delivery mode; and

WHEREAS, Strong community support and interest has been demonstrated in Okanogan and Jefferson counties to obtain additional higher education services in an economical and feasible manner; relying on community efforts to address the special economic, social and geographical challenges that confront rural area students; and

WHEREAS, The lessons learned in this study of under-served rural area issues can be further explored and refined through the initiation of pilot programs to develop and implement creative approaches to deliver flexible, targeted, responsive higher education programs to rural areas across the State of Washington; and

WHEREAS, The Legislature has demonstrated its interest and support of finding ways to address the special higher education needs of under-served rural areas by providing funding in the 1999-2001 state budget to the Higher Education Coordinating Board for a pilot demonstration project in Jefferson County; and

WHEREAS, Staff of the Higher Education Coordinating Board have, in consultation with the project Coordination Team and Community Advisory Groups in Okanogan and Jefferson Counties,

reviewed the methodology, findings, analysis and recommendations of the Consultant, and based on such review, and in consideration of the public input received from surveys and in Town Meetings, have prepared a staff report entitled "Postsecondary Education Needs of Okanogan and Jefferson Counties: Staff Recommendations", dated July 14, 1999; and

WHEREAS, The Executive Director of the Higher Education Coordinating Board has transmitted the staff report to the Board and is proposing Board action on the findings and recommendations contained in that staff report; and

WHEREAS, The Board has reviewed the staff analysis and recommendations submitted by the Executive Director and, based on that review has incorporated said staff report in its action to adopt the recommendations advanced by the Executive Director;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That the Higher Education Coordinating Board hereby adopts the following policies and actions in response to the requirements set forth in Section 610 of the 1997-99 Operating Budget Appropriations Act (Chapter 149, Laws of 1997):

The Board approves the staff report entitled "Postsecondary Education Needs of Okanogan and Jefferson Counties: Staff Recommendations", dated July 14, 1999, and directs that this report be transmitted to the Legislature, Office of Financial Management, and participating higher education institutions.

The Board clarifies that the participation rate goals established for the state in each master plan effort are intended to apply to all the citizens of the state. To the extent that residents of rural areas confront unique challenges in obtaining access to higher education programs, the state should make every effort to develop innovative, effective and economical approaches to providing educational opportunity to those residents.

The Board recognizes that methods and approaches to provide improved access to higher education services in under-served rural areas across the state will be developed and tested in pilot programs in Okanogan and Jefferson Counties. Distance education, e-learning, continuing needs assessment, inter-institutional cooperation and new strategies for student information and support will be implemented in these two areas, and many of the lessons learned will be applicable to all under-served rural areas of the State of Washington.

The Board endorses the ongoing efforts of staff to integrate into the master planning process consideration of the special needs and opportunities that lie within the rural areas of the state. Policies and proposals to address these needs in a flexible, effective and economical manner will be addressed in the final master plan.

Adopted:

July 14, 1999

Attest:

Bob Craves, Chair

David Shaw, Secretary